

# Human Trafficking Legal Service Providers Respond to COVID-19

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## Background & Significance

### Human Trafficking

- The United States government defines human trafficking as “a crime that involves exploiting a person for labor, services, or commercial sex”
- In the U.S., over 11K people trafficked annually; in PA 628 victims recorded in 2018
- Survivors may benefit from a myriad of support services including medical or mental health care, social services, or legal services

### Human Trafficking Legal Needs & Services

#### Non-U.S. residents:

- T Nonimmigrant Status (“T Visa”) which would grant the survivor to remain in the U.S. for up to four years following being trafficked
- Survivors may also be eligible to apply for U Nonimmigrant Status (“U Visa”), a victim-centered visa for those who have suffered either physical and/or mental abuse by the hands of someone while in the U.S.

#### U.S. residents or non-U.S. residents:

- Civil legal issues commonly faced by survivors include employment law, family law, rights enforcement, repatriation, and public benefits access
- A survivor may also have a criminal record related to their trafficking experience that may limit the survivor’s ability to find safe and stable housing, employment, or access to public benefits

### The 2019 Novel Coronavirus Pandemic

- The World Health Organization declared Coronavirus a pandemic in March 2020
- In Pennsylvania, Governor Tom Wolf announced a statewide stay-at-home order on April 1, 2020
- The stay-at-home order left offices vacant and businesses scrambling to adjust to a teleworking environment
- Organizations that provide legal services to human trafficking survivors were no exception to this struggle; understanding how these organizations were challenged by and adapted to the pandemic may provide insight for other agencies now and in the future

### Approach

- Conducted semi-structured key informant interviews with representatives from 5 organizations in the Greater Philadelphia Area who provide legal services to survivors of human trafficking



- The interviews were recorded using Zoom software, and coded and transcribed using Microsoft-based software

## Interview Results



“...at least a couple of times a week, the client would come in and meet with you...” Org. 1



“...like the relationship building and in-person like meetings that we have with people in small groups, like it just doesn't... We've done Zoom, we've done Facebook stuff, it's just not the way to go. It's not the way to build meaningful, like long-term relationships.” Org. 4



“How do we make sure people have working computers? Some of our staff didn't have computers at home. Many people didn't have printers at home. Laptops are backordered.” Org. 4



“I think check in just like as a statement is a really solid piece of advice that I would want to give someone, because it's not just check in with yourself and make sure you're OK, but like check in with your coworkers and make sure that they're OK and feel supported...” Org. 5



“You know, naturally, we got involved in that just to raise awareness that these were going to be critical issues that people were going to be facing at home and in isolation. And quietly.” Org. 2



“So we have clients who don't have a computer or Internet access or a consistent place to live or a consistent cell phone number. So getting in touch with them, generally speaking, tends to be not the easiest process, let alone trying to be like, oh, can we do this video call?” Org. 5



“So I think the biggest issues were transportation to the office, still needing rent assistance. Finding mental health assistance... Finding like bilingual mental health services has been an issue.” Org. 2



“But there was definitely a need for cash when people were out of work. And there's been a need for childcare and extra support...” Org. 1

## Business Impact Assessment

Business Impact Assessment		Recovery Strategies	Plan Development	Testing & Exercises
Emergent Themes	Business Continuity Considerations			
Organizational workspace functionality	Viable work-from-home strategy			
Organizational access to technology	Separate funds for technology hardware			
Organizational communication strategy	Investment in communication software (i.e. Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom)			
Organizational self-care strategy	Offer additional paid-time-off hours			
Client access to technology	Separate funds for technology hardware for clients			
Client communication strategy	Develop community partnerships to plan for client need for space and privacy for sensitive conversations; assume your organization is not able to provide this service			

## Discussion

- Although the organizations interviewed provide a niche service, the lessons they shared may apply across multiple industries
- As the pandemic continues to unfold, it is suspected that additional studies such as this one will be required to understand the full impact the pandemic had on society
- The climate’s overall variability could conceive another pandemic or similar emergency in the future

## Acknowledgements

- Dr. Rosie Frasso- Thank you for saying what I needed to hear to get me through this project!
- Laura Slifer, MPH- Thank you for your support through this venture!
- Dr. Colin Plover- Thank you for helping me find my way to this project!
- Markell Bishop- Thank you for your partnership and never-ending patience and support!

\*References available upon request.



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